

Shaun Grech • Karen Soldatic  
Editors

# Disability in the Global South

The Critical Handbook

### *Editors*

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## Chapter 8

### Religion After the Medical Miracle: Recovering “Disability” as Religious Analytic of Social Suffering

Sharon V. Betcher and Mary Nyangweso Wangila

Religions have used disability, like gender, to think with. After briefly essaying the ways religious systems think with and about corporeal anomaly, this chapter considers how the Christian West justified its “humane imperialism” by reading disability as degeneracy in need of medical remediation. Digging into the particulars of how disability became for Christianity the external boundary of what counts as human kin and kind, it considers two key historical epochs: (1) the early missional discernment of monstrosities at the ends of the earth which lent itself to the eschatological urgency of remedial impulse (400–800 c.e.); and (2) modern realism which developed a picture of Jesus-as-Healer simultaneous to the western colonial and scientific age of discovery (Kwok 1998). That epistemological rendering of Jesus authorized the transgress of boundaries in the name of healing. This exemplary history follows one particularly strong and residual valence of Christian missional colonialism towards the South, a valence heavily inflected with the deployment of the metaphor of disability as an affect-inflected, geopolitical map. Health may be a still under-analyzed vector of imperialism, one that has been easily cloaked by religious affect. Consequently, this chapter, reconsidering the metaphorical plethora of religious thought regarding disability, insinuates “the anti-colonial politics of disabled persons” (Meekosha 2008) within the Christian gospels so as to interrupt that humanist reading and its trajectory of trespass.

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## Thinking with Disability

Most religions suggest that perceptions of disability constitute in themselves a spiritual delusion (Rao 2004: 118). Nonetheless, religions have developed rules of social conduct that short-circuit the basic spiritual truth that all beings are of ultimate spirit. While the major axial religions overtly acknowledge the human experience of suffering and insinuate that suffering can be companioned, even shared, disabled bodies are often caught in personal and systemically entrenched aversion to suffering. Disgust, fear and other prejudices can become consequently lodged in religious constructs such that Ultimate Reality—heaven or nirvana, for example—may be viewed as a realm without pain, a metaphysical construct that holds material bodies under judgment. Contrarily (and these strains can appear within the same religion), thinking Ultimate Reality as co-extensive with the material world, such that one lives radical finitude with spiritual nonjudgment, openness, and compassion, suggests the realm of everyday culture as the locus of spirit. Insisting that Daoism constitutes a religious cosmology more amenable to the experience of disability, Darla Schumm explains how:

Western religions tend to place their trust in an invisible stability that somehow transcends the fleeting experience of time, whereas Daoism...celebrates the...mysterious creativity within the very fabric of time and space itself.... Daoism rejects a conflict dualism rooted in absolute distinctions between good and evil, heaven and hell, health and illness, ability and disability. Nothing is purely matter or spirit. All things are flowing in the midst of everything else. (Schumm and Stoltzfus 2011: 105–106)

That disability appears in the eyes of its beholders, even against the backdrop of contemporary evolutionary science and philosophical awareness of interdependent co-arising, suggests that one of the following conditions may be true: religious origin narratives do not appreciatively include material fluidity; religions can be more or less motivated by a sense of “natural order” and then cling to notions of kin and kind out of a sense of misplaced security; or metaphysical visions of God or Brahman refuse the reality of pain, thus rendering people with disabilities as not only materially but also spiritually deficient. When a religion supremely values a static, unchanging vision of the transcendental realm, a vision of an original state of health, of Eden, and/or of the body, that religious community may in turn handle biological mutability as auspicious or “tragic.”

Affectively, religious aesthetics can be directed toward transcendental ideals, aspects that allow the subject to be free from embodied limitations and entanglements—like today’s much touted “state of health.” The religious performance of that transcendental aspiration, even as it has been assumed by cosmopolitan zones of secular liberalism, constitutes something of a “decency theology” (Althaus-Reid 2000: 9)—comparable to “ablenationalism,” where economic and civil expectations have come to shape understandings of what is normal and proper for bodies (Snyder and Mitchell 2010: 113). Those religiously assumed expectations of what is, for example, “upright,” a postural schema yoked with notions of morality, may be performatively out of reach for people living with corporeal anomaly or impairment. Consequently, people with disabilities and their families often take leave of religious communities (Kabue 2012: 16). Problematically, secular zones may be no

Yet, if religious analytics seem, like cultures at large, to receive disability as negative, this constitutes but one spectral range of religious interpretation of disability. Reminding us that what constitutes western notions of health are not universal, postcolonial disabilities scholar Mark Sherry (2007) notes that among Flathead Indians depression might be not an illness, but a maturational horizon from which we have seen and chosen to carry the suffering of all beings—a position not unlike that for which a *bodhisatva* is praised. The Christian bible itself suggests diverse ways in which disablement has been a tool for generating spiritual value: Jacob’s limp, a result of wrestling with a night visitant (Genesis), resonates with the historic sense that disability has sometimes been seen as a portentous visitation from the divine. If Paul’s virtuosity was “made perfect in weakness” (2 Corinthians 12.9), then disability may serve as a teaching harness for the spiritual qualities of leadership as surely as illness marked the initiatory threshold of the Korean shaman. “In ancient literature,” notes biblical scholar Simon Horne, “paradox is associated with inability in a particular way: within inability is striking capability .... As if to underline the axiom’s truth, the authority held in greatest respect in ancient society for his insight into human and divine affairs was a blind person, the epic poet Homer” (1998: 89–90). The same might be said of stuttering Moses, who in Jewish history, led the Children of Israel out of Egyptian captivity (Exodus 4:10–12). The metaphor of disablement has in scripture also been deployed as a spiritual diagnostic: “You Pharisees are blinder than the blind” (John 9), Jesus purportedly asserted, borrowing the experience to suggest that sight was never a guarantee of insight. The sixteenth-century Christian theologian Martin Luther suspected that disability might be a test of Christians’ strength to love through aversion and anxiety. Comparably, disability is perceived in Yoruba communities—where Obatala the deity, tasked with the responsibility of creating humans, got himself drunk in the process, thus yielding disability—as a social challenge rather than a symptom of sin. These examples begin to insinuate the diverse refractions of “thinking with disability,” troubling the singular western notion of disability as deficiency.

Corporeal alterity appears before the beholder only inasmuch as religio-cultural strictures desire sameness. Where that has happened, crips have been sequestered by Levitical laws, institutionalized in poorhouses or sanitariums, or hidden away by civic codes like “the ugly laws.” The crip—again, exposed only to the extent that a system cannot tolerate alterity—then becomes a sign of the constructedness of human, even religious, sensibilities—a sign that nature not only radically differs within itself, but of the need for rethinking religio-cultural orders. Disability challenges religions to reconsider the ways in which, given evolutionary science, “there are no grounds for conceiving of it as an aberration” (Stiker 1999: 12). Without an extraterrestrial, metaphysical location—without a purported God’s eye view—from which to judge, “each entity in the mesh [of nature] looks strange” (Morton 2010: 15). Reality is a “generator of differences, among which is disability” (Stiker 1999: 13). Religions can think with and value that generator of difference; but equally they can succumb to anxiety in the face of difference.



## Colonial Mission Brings the Medical Miracle

Disability, theorist Helen Meekosha (2008) advises us, is a term developed in the western context. And indeed critical disability studies have tracked “the invention of the disabled body” to 19th-century western developments amid industrialization—namely, as the inverse of the sense of the norm, the normal and normalcy developed through statistics and set loose through public practices around nationality, race, public health, and criminality (Davis 1997: 9–10). We, however, push this history back, locating the affective precursors for this development within the western Christian history of salvation, which influences the affective arcs—the paternalism, shame and humiliation—within which people living with disabilities are still caught. Coming out of this salvation history, the stigmata of disability has become in western consciousness short-hand for remediation urgently needed (think, for example, of the “need” to remediate wheelchair-riding Jake Sully around which the plot of the 2009 movie *Avatar* silently pivots). Consequently, the adrenal rush of habituated urgency enculturated through salvific mission in relation to disability can easily occasion socio-political and somatic trespass. Always already, the presence of disability stigmata presumes the power of miraculous remediation, whether at the hands of religion or biotechnoscience. Here we consequently consider specific ways in which the Christian West justified its “humane imperialism” by resorting to reading disability singularly as degeneracy in need of miraculous remediation, given a religious metaphysics that rejects pain and evolutionary mutations as inherent to material existence. And degeneracy, we do well to remember, informed notions of race and gender as well as disability in the western eye (Betcher 2007: 49).

After the fall of the Roman empire, Christianity read morphological anomalies as indicative of a world gone ontologically awry and, comparably, of the inverse calibration of transcendental power of Spirit to reset Edenic wholeness without pain (Betcher 2007). The late 4th-century writings of Augustine not only links blindness, deafness or being born with “as little wit as the cattle” with humanity’s “condemned origin,” but theologically shades these experiences with guilt, that is, “God forbid we say this is done without its being deserved” (1957: 118, 115). Consequently, this theological landscape will be telescoped into an analytic of “brokenness” attuned not so much to “obedience to transcendental command,” but—as critical disabilities scholar Lennard Davis has surmised—“to an intrinsic design of thing” (Schoolman 1991: xviii). Western Christianity, ruminating on the world’s presumed fall from original grace and its ontological outcroppings (namely, defect), effectively set in motion, beginning no later than the 4th century, the development of a comprehensive, cultural optic deployed as map to rescale the monstrous bodies on its geographic margins and in its cultural midst (Schuld 2003: 151).

Western Christianity’s impulse to assess the boundaries of humanity already implicit with Augustine would be ratcheted up by Christianity’s missionary drive during the 7th to 10th centuries. If Augustine in one breadth bemoaned the ruined origins occasioning monstrous births, contrary to “the persistent norm of nature” (*City of God* XVI.8, 1984: 662), he simultaneously mused, leaning into the Greco-Roman teratological traditions, upon the monstrosities—cyclopes, pygmies, scio-pods, and hermaphrodites—set as figures along territorial borders. Augustine,

relying on Pliny’s *Natural History* to supplement regional tales, believed the monstrous races limning borders to be continuous with the monstrous births known among any populace. But Augustine comparably believed that heaven held the miracle of remediation to normalcy for such bodies. Consequently, such spectacles reawakened human wonder and respect for “the vigorous power” of God (*On the Gospel of John* 8.2.1, 2007: 57).

We catch in Augustine the catalyst for conceiving the norm of nature, the consequent treatment of disability as guilt-ridden defect and expectation of remediation. Simultaneously, we note the instantiation of a geographical sense of mission driven by the same optic. Frightful curios were presumed to populate the uncivilized territories; the teratological encyclopedia consequently served as map of the ends of the earth, “disability” shading the moral and geographic territory through which Christianity must traverse to accomplish salvation. Christian evangelization takes shape as an act of pastoral concern, but a concern vested with the self-interested, internal urgency to extend the gospel to the ends of the earth so as to occasion the end of time and, hence, the return of God and the conditions of Eden. If for Augustine the monstrous were clearly “bodies of evidence” in and for divine power, they now become an eschatological keystone: evangelical mission proceeded as repair to the ends of the earth, which simultaneously necessitated remediation of the ravaged edges of humanity. The eschatological urgency of impulse to remediation aggravates against the morphological anomalies seen to be peopling the horizon of the Christian imaginary.

One now readily anticipates anthropologist Jean Comaroff’s conclusions from her exploration of the relationships of medicine and imperialism in South Africa during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries: “The early soldiers of Christendom were also the cutting edge of colonialism, and when they tried to domesticate the realities of the ‘dark’ interior [of Africa], they drew heavily on the iconography and practice of healing” (1993: 306). Modern colonialism—evolving hand-in-hand with the co-incident “birth of the clinic” as the lay form of clerical ministry (Foucault 1994) and with the scriptural “discovery” of the historical Jesus (Kwok 1998), now “remembered” as healer set against the “miserable, disabled wāsh of humanity” (Von Harnack 1908: 109)—advanced by laying out the template of disability as a geosocial map of the world. The zones of degeneracy identified through this optic mobilized the evangelical impulse of earlier eras of Christian mission, as missionaries imitated the one they now saw as Jesus-the-Healer, the miracle worker. Already infused with the eschatological impulse to save, to teach, to rehabilitate, Christian mission-cum-modernization sailed towards “the poor, diseased heart of Africa” (British missionary Rev. W.C. Willoughby, cited in Comaroff 1993: 305), as it simultaneously worked feverishly at home to civilize the degenerate classes: racial others, the working class, people with disabilities. As “a climate of technical optimism and rational idealism” swelled in Europe and as Europe now looked through its telescopic optic, the stage was set for colonialism under the auspices of the new science of health (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: 186). As Jean Comaroff succinctly concludes, “Metaphors of healing have justified ‘humane imperialism’” (1993: 313). The optic of degeneracy—that is, seeing others as needy and suffering—occasioned colonial trespass.



Disability, along with its cognates of deficiency and degeneracy, has been one of the most significant memes in the colonial campaign to reinvent life-worlds in the global South. In this, disablement names as well an affective template for “colonizing consciousness” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: xi). “The essence of colonization,” as Jean and John Comaroff explain, “inheres less in political overrule than in seizing and transforming ‘others’ by the very act of conceptualizing, inscribing, and interacting with them on terms not of their choosing; in making them into pliant objects and silenced subjects of our scripts and scenarios, in assuming the capacity to ‘represent’ them” (1991: 15). If “the silent power of the sign, the unspoken authority of habit, may be as effective as the most violent coercion in shaping, directing, even dominating social thought and action” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: 22), nothing works so well as the optic of disability set within the theatre of miracle, whether religious or scientific. “Colonial relations,” Jean Comaroff concludes, “found an alibi in the ailing human body” (1993: 307). The template of deficiency remains an aspect of evangelical Christian, if also medical and scientific, mission moving from North to South today.

Because people living with disability tend to retreat from religion, having experienced their churches, synagogues, and sangas as places of exclusion (not just physically, but psychically and philosophically), it is important to note that religiously scaled affective maps of disability have migrated into and informed the supposedly secular, cosmopolitan realm where, as Gil Andijar puts it, “Christianity forgot and forgave itself” (2006: 63). Deconstruction of the religiously informed, political affects which crips regularly encounter—for example, the anticipation of deficiency, benevolent paternalism, fear of contagion—will therefore require attention not only within formal religious structures, but in the cosmopolitan secular zone. “The hardest science,” historian of science Donna Haraway noted, demarcating the trajectory of western Christianity, “is always about the most pure spirit” (1991: 153). Even the medical miracle remains hinged to certain religious anthropologies, metaphysical assumptions and epistemological optics.

While the medical and religious senses of miracle as “miraculous remediation of disability” seem to vie for credible belief, their competition virtually forecloses any other particularly religious appreciation of disability. At the intersection of western culture and its ideology of health, “the ‘savages’ of colonialism are ushered, by earnest Protestant evangelists, into the revelation of their own misery, are promised salvation through self-discovery and civilization, and are drawn into a conversation with the culture of modern capitalism” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: xii). But hence they “find themselves enmeshed, willingly or not, in its order of signs and values, interests and passions, wants and needs” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: xii). These theatrics of religion and science, sunk in modern realism and deadlocked for power in the West, having for centuries played themselves out in the lives of people of the South, may occlude other epistemological ways of looking at and living health. But, as John and Jean Comaroff presciently remind us, “[E]ven as they are encompassed by the European capitalist system—consumed, ironically, as they consume its goods and texts—these ‘natives’ of other worlds often seek to seize its symbols, to question their authority and integrity, and to reconstruct them in their own image,” in

such a way as to “escape [the dominant order] without leaving it” (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991: xii, sic). Reconsidering the metaphorical plethora of religious thought regarding disability may then, we hope, insinuate “the anti-colonial politics of disabled persons” (Meekosha 2008) within the Christian gospels so as to suggestively interrupt this western reading and its self-authorization for colonial trespass.

### Inside My Wound There Is a People

The all-consuming dialectic of pathology and health belies the raw exposure of lives laid bare by the socio-economic process of neocolonialism-cum-globalization. Most impairment across the world today is owed to such phenomena as residual landmines, industrialization moved to ecologically uncontrolled zones, exposure to pesticides among migrant laborers, the nuclearization of the South Sea Islands, militarization among gangs, tribes, and nations as well as within culture wars, where “gender trouble” has resulted in acid attacks. Against this socio-economic, ecological and political landscape, the analytic of “disability” seems but to open out the intensities of the pathologized body to global capital. “Disability,” inasmuch as it has named individuated, somatic or neurological deficit, becomes financially lucrative to the mobile, capitalist class as it harvests the geopolitical heaps of “wasted lives” (Bauman 2004) for intensive capitalist investment. As Jasbir Puar observes in terms of western interpretations of disability, “the knitting together of finance capitalism and the medical-industrial complex means that debility pays, and pays well” (2012: 149). People with disabilities in the global South will then be caught between this and the refusal of many governments to make social and educational inclusion a priority.

Philosopher Giorgio Agamben might use the term “bare life” to speak of these geopolitical fields of human lives devoid of value except as brought into economics as objects of finance capital (cited in Bauman 2004: 32, 40). Populations exposed through generations of impoverishment, chemical slow violence, militarization, and labor conditions, all of which aggravate impairment, become “valuable” to the global socio-economic system, a system of financial and corporate elites and the governments that open access gates for them, only as individuated and objectified “disability” awaiting medical remediation. Caught up in the theatrics of science and religion, “disability”—divested of socio-political considerations—seems an inadequate name for this scene of lives invalidated and fiscally disposed. People living with disabilities, which includes geosocial population swathes of the South, recognize that “miraculous remediation of disablement” simply returns one to the heap of people already made redundant, those set outside labor and political processes.

Because disability has marked an individuated body in need of miraculous remediation to normalcy, and because “disability” ties individuated consciousness to “living in prognosis” (an obsession which avoids socio-political analysis), Meekosha (2008) and Puar (2012) both worry about speaking of these scenes of exposure in terms of “disability,” which in turn but marks a geographical region for imperial “benevolence.” While surveying the living conditions of indigenous people in



remote Australia, the conditions of workers in the export processing zones, and the disease consequences of wars, which themselves appear to be aggravated by northern resource extraction, Meekosha concludes that “concepts of disability and impairment seem hopelessly inadequate” to the experience of 66 per cent of the world’s disabled people (2008). More adequate, she contends, would be the concept of “social suffering,” since the analytic of “disability” deteriorates but to “the concept of personal tragedy” (Meekosha 2008). Given the West’s ideology of health as the capaciousness of a normative body to which debility is but an extraordinary exception, “disability” evades socio-political and economic analysis. Puar likewise asserts—while thinking with Lauren Berlant’s insight into “populations marked out for wearing out”—that “disability must be rethought in terms of precarious populations” (2012: 152, 154). So could the analytic of “disability” be socio-politically embedded in such a way as to capaciously enable what neo-marxist philosophers Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri call “this monstrous power of the flesh of the multitude to form a new society,” to “change its own species” (2004: 193, 196)? If the South is today harbinger of the North (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012) and “the new world of monsters is where humanity has to grasp its future” (Hardt and Negri 2004: 196), could “disability” come to mean anything other than deficit of an individual *in extremis*? In this vein we look back at the religious plethora of meaning-making related to disability.

The refrain celebrating that “the blind see, the lame walk, the deaf hear” was set as banner headline and narrative emplotment for Jesus’ ministry in the Christian gospels (Matthew 11.5; Luke 7.22). Christian literature has consequently been read to lift up Jesus-as-Healer working miraculous remediation of bodies disabled, a scene of incomparable importance not only to Christianity’s “strong theology” (as already epitomized in Augustine), but to the aspirations of western biotechnoscience. Theological archaeology, digging into the textual strata and thus recalling that the liturgy was borrowed from days lived amid empire at the time of Isaiah (Isaiah 35.5), might rather lift up scenes of socio-political and economic dislocation. More particularly, the stigmata of blindness, deafness and lameness appear archaeologically consistent with the practices of slave holding: so as to prevent their flight, slaves were in ancient times blinded, hobbled or had their eardrums punched out. Under imperial duress, when oppressed people resorted to communication by means of “hidden transcripts” (Scott 1990: 27), as might be anticipated in terms of the Christian gospels, references to disablement—whether the madness of spirit possession (e.g., the possession by “Legions” likely referred to the occupation by the Roman army) or the marks of blindness, deafness and lameness—might well have served as protest against people’s political enslavement, whether specifically economic or that occasioned when preoccupied by definitions not of their own choosing. The stigmata help them analytically remember the socio-economic and political conditions that brought about such suffering—namely, their exiles as slaves in Egypt and later in Babylon. Remediation comparably carries not so much the hope of “health” *per se* but of economic justice and political freedom. If so, the biblical metaphors of disablement and their “healing” may better be remembered as resistance to social and economic suffering. Chicana poet Cherie Moraga catches this

sensibility when she writes, echoing Jesus’ post-resurrection invitation to the disciples (John 20.27), “Put your hand inside my wound. Inside the valley of my wound there is a people” (cited in Davidson 2011 [2008]: 196). Unlike western notions of disability, these stigmata clearly carry awareness of political ground conditions and pose an analytic interruption within history.

Further, the Christian gospels can be read to pivot around one himself remembered as a disfigured slave-servant, who himself knew the ways humans could humiliate flesh and who queered that humiliation-cum-humility. This is not the Jesus that serves as northern liberalism’s mirror of narcissism, but the tradition which interpolated Jesus as crip, a tradition stretching from Isaiah 53 in the Hebrew bible through the Christian gospel traditions to our contemporary, the historian of science Donna Haraway. Sounding a postcolonial call, Haraway urges us to “set aside the Enlightenment figures of coherent and masterful subjectivity, the bearers of rights, holders of property in the self,” encouraging us to think beyond humanism by thinking with “brokenness”—specifically, by recalling Jesus as an historical grotesque. Interpolated through Isaiah’s figuration of the suffering servant-slave, Jesus emerges as related to colonialism’s “inappropriate/d others” (Haraway 1992: 87).

Remembering Jesus as disfigured slave-servant has been pivotal for Dalit theology, the Indian theology of the “broken ones.” The Dalits, also known as “The Untouchables,” constitute 15–18 per cent of India’s population and are the sociological result “of the caste system mentioned in the Rig Veda” (Rao 2004: 63, 81). For Arvind P. Nirmal, the founder of Dalit theology, God in Jesus—and Nirmal too interpolates Jesus through Isaiah 53’s sketch of the disfigured slave—identifies God’s self with the Dalits (cited in Rao 2004: 233). As Dalit theologian Moses P. P. Penumaka has likewise surmised, this affiliation of God with humiliated flesh then inverts metaphysics such that—contrary to the aristocratic notions of the ninth-century Hindu philosopher Shankara, if also Christianity’s “strong theology”—God has been poured into and can only be encountered in the most radical embrace of finitude and flesh. In such a way, “the mundane sufferings of humble people are dignified by receiving a place in God’s reality” (Penumaka 2006: 252).

Argentinian theologian Marcella Althaus-Reid echoed the insights of the Dalit theologians, lifting up the parallel between those people who live without a structured world—the socially, politically, sexually dis-identified and dispossessed—and Jesus, the bastard child of Mary, socially humiliated because she was impregnated during the Roman military occupation. Jesus, she asserted, must then be but a contaminated Messiah: “Jesus brings ... contamination and contagion into Divine revelation” (Althaus-Reid 2005: 396). We embrace God at our own risk—at the risk of contamination, that is, which will yield an alternative law of tact or touch, an alternative body politics: the divine economy proves itself an alternative to the path of industry, of cultural comeliness.

“At the very moment when the name Israel is accorded to the Hebrew people, the subject of disability arises” (Stiker 1999: 28), Henri-Jacques Stiker observed in his religious history of disability. Stiker was thinking of Jacob wrestling with the nocturnal divine visitor, leaving him limping (see Genesis 32:23–33). Holmes Rolston III, however, recognizes the consistency between this scene and Israel as itself a “crip



nation,” as a people who have been formed by the economics, and human-on-human violence, of enslavement (Rolston 1994: 220). In the gospel stories, Jesus himself was initially remembered as uncomely and disfigured, like the suffering slave-servant (Isaiah 53), and thus reminiscent of stuttering Moses and limping Jacob. So one wonders if the gospel narratives were occasions of anticolonial Oedipal mimesis (Oedipus himself being a crippled and exposed infant), circulated so as to trouble the conscience of those in the Greco-Roman city. That paradigmatic scene of encounter with alterity and the importance of navigating it without fear, disgust or aversion has been recalled ever and again within religious practices beginning with reminders about “entertaining God or Christ unaware,” in the stranger on the road as well as among the imprisoned, the hungry, the thirsty (see Matthew 25). At the least, these might help us remember to read Jesus as a figure within a series of tableaux, beginning with the night wrestler, left “crip” hero, Jacob (Sherwood 2006: 178), and the “limping nation” bearing his name (Rolston 1994: 220). That then allows for the further possibility that the crippled iconography at the heart of Christianity might interpolate us into different socio-political allegiances than but lending ourselves to the West’s conceit of health.

In such ways Christians might insinuate crip disruptive readings of the ways in which the biblical text, in the scope of modern realism, assumed the marginalization of disability as ever assuredly deficit. Given “The power of the bible in the global South” (Jenkins 2006), this biblical archaeology becomes an important means of refusing the imperial vector, especially where it leans into strong theology: invoking disability need not raze or undercut resistance to social suffering, but could return us to care for the commons of social flesh. Only the medicalized arc of western interpretation (the body interpreted through what Davis called “the hallucination of wholeness”), along with its generation of the autonomous individual, prevents Christianity’s sacred texts from being read in a way that these celebrate not miraculous cure of individual disablement by Jesus-as-Healer, but disruption of the economics enslaving bodies—thus situating disability as symptomatic of inherently socio-political and economic suffering.

## What Notion of the Good Life Might Yet Come to Bear

Assuming the South to be a harbinger of conditions moving North (Comaroff and Comaroff 2012), crips—in ways comparable to the central characters we play in “dystopian” or postapocalyptic literature—prove pivotal to “living after the end of the world” (Morton 2010). The so-called dystopian literature—and the ironic “scare quotes” befit this form of literature, which wonders if there may be more fulfilling ways of living than we have experienced in the turbocapitalist strata—pivot crip characters front and center. As this “dystopian” literary implosion shows up the West’s post-industrial, socially urbane and consumer chic “conceit of health,” respect for suffering might well return to the religious agenda. Respect for suffering flies in the face of a modernity which presumed its biotechnoscientifically assured eradication. Bodies that have learned to tack through wakes thereof, including the riptides of social humiliation, may be welcomed companions.

It’s intriguing to consider what might yet be thought, if the Christian scriptures were allowed to function as “dystopian” in relation to empire, initially Rome, now the global capitalist marketplace. What notions of the good life come to bear when the “ablenationalist” (Snyder and Mitchell 2010: 113) God no longer judges and sorts bodies? When the religious or medical miracle is no longer deployed to rehabilitate bodies back into the worker-armies of the upright and the consumer “culture of public appearance” (Betcher 2007: 28–30)? A dystopian lens might at the least help us remember that wholeness has not necessarily been the mark of the spiritually authoritative. Such questions, disseminated as analytic prompts among communities “that identify with the social and economic realities the Bible portrays” (Jenkins 2006), may help us constitute a location from which we are able “to form alternative networks of existence and resistance to normative relations of consumption, competition, and class conflict” (Mitchell and Snyder 2010: 179).

To be sure, disability, experientially speaking, tends initially to be experienced as an aesthetic surplus that overwhelms the onlooker’s rational thought processes. Morphological disabilities often elicit a visceral response—of culturally habituated disgust, thus skirting reason, self-control, and empathy. We cannot emotionally escape shared bio-affective social flesh—thus, we cringe at the guillotine amputation of another. Religious practitioners can be as stricken with avoidance as culture at large. But religions have developed affect practices to mitigate habituated aversions and thus be able to welcome and love the strange/r. Fears can be navigated with equanimity. Affective practices like seeing Buddha or Christ, even as disfigured grotesque (Isaiah 53), in the other are intended to expand our neuropolitical neighborhood, to open out an enlarged aesthetics. Religions—drawing on such ancient practices as carrying the pain of another (Buddhist *tonglen*), corpse meditation to traverse enculturated disgust, and alternative accounts of beauty—might help stretch the ethical breadth of living with alterity without inducing panic attacks.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, we have shown that viewing disability as degeneracy in need of medical remediation short-circuits the basic religious truth that all beings are, in essence, spirit and therefore kin. To render people with disabilities as materially and spiritually deficient is to ignore diverse, enriching ways that disability has been lived and can be interpreted. Further, we have named several religious practices that meet the criteria of theory from the South for thinking disability as social suffering: (1) the Oedipal theatre of disabled alterity as central to the spiritual practice of welcoming and respecting divine presence; (2) insinuating disruptive readings of western medical-humanitarian colonialism by releasing clinical language to take in the imperial conditions of slavery in the political background of sacred texts.

Amid the diverse religious ways of considering disability, the optic of modern realism and Christian mission, moving hand-in-hand North to South, assumed disability as degeneracy and thereby justified its missional and medical imperialism. Postcolonial and dystopian literatures evidence another crip modality than that presumed by the



West, a view which we proposed using as an alternative optic for reading the Christian gospels, given "The power of the bible in the global South" (Jenkins 2006). In this view, the stigmata of disability, as lived by people of the global South, helps one to critique the economic and political conditions that occasion enslaving or wasting human life—as, for example, by making it carry an undue burden of precariousness. Sharon Snyder and David Mitchell appropriately remind us that "[b]ands of disabled people have produced viable alternatives to the consumptive models of capital and the expulsion of bodily imperfection in order to envision a meaningful contrast of lifestyles, values, and investments adapted to life as discontinuity and contingency" (2010: 192). Reading the Christian gospels as dystopian in this way might release that future which is so hopefully monstrous (Derrida 1995: 386–387).

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